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U.S. | RUIN AND RENEWAL

Crackdown in a Detroit Stripped of Metal Parts

By JOHN ELIGON MARCH 15, 2015

DETROIT — It was a typical frigid winter night in this city, only now a historic blizzard was on the way. Robert Jones Jr., homeless and jobless for more than a decade, calculated his next move.

This 62-year-old resident of Detroit's North End knew the slice of pizza he had just been given by a store clerk would not last. He needed some quick cash. So on his way home he detoured down familiar railroad tracks, looking for the industrial junkyard where for many years, he said, he could grab loose pieces of metal to sell, usually without repercussions. Yet within minutes, his instincts started to speak up.

“Something in the back of my mind said, ‘Get out of here,’ ” recalled Mr. Jones, who had been arrested in this yard six years earlier. Too late. Security guards stopped him, and the police came. And as had happened before, the only metal he left with was a pair of handcuffs slapped to his wrists.

For generations, scavengers have prowled this city with impunity, pouncing on abandoned properties and light poles to pilfer steel, copper and other metals they could trade for cash at scrapyards. The practice left tens of thousands of buildings so damaged that they could not be restored, turning places like the North End into grim cityscapes that appeared to have been ravaged by a tornado.

In recent years, the city has become serious about fighting back. It razed dozens of rickety homes — lucrative scrapping targets — in this neighborhood alone in the past year. Residents have become increasingly vigilant about

chasing scrappers away from their blocks, lawmakers have enacted rules making it more difficult to turn a quick profit from scrapping, and the police and private and public agencies have stepped up enforcement efforts.

The battle has been critical in places like the North End, a community with both expansive blight and bright economic potential, given its proximity to the city's cultural and commercial heart.

Yet even as the crackdown on scrapping helps make neighborhoods like the North End look better, it is sounding a death knell for part of the underground economy that took root during Detroit's long years of decay. And with that, people who continue to have bleak job prospects in the city's stubbornly sluggish economy are finding their struggle to survive that much harder.

Today, Mr. Jones, who goes by the nickname Rabbi, subsists by Dumpster diving, doing odd jobs and, when he sees the opportunity, scavenging scrap metal. It is a dreary existence, evident in his drowsy eyes, a hardened face surrounded by a gray mane, a voice groggy from endless nights of sleeping in the biting cold and the torn and smeared jackets he wears in layers.

He never graduated from high school because his mother died when he was a senior and he was too anguished to continue, he said. He has seven children by several women, but he lost contact with them in part because of his drug addiction, which he said he kicked six years ago. He avoids his three siblings even though, he said, he believes they would help him if he asked. He lives in an abandoned house.

"I don't want them feeling my pain," he said of his siblings, noting that his sister cried the last time she saw him.

Mr. Jones was arrested at the yard on Jan. 31 while he and another North End man were toting a large bag with six pieces of scrap metal, including four heavy discs and a 14-inch pipe, according to a police report. A few days later, his file crossed the desk of Sgt. Rebecca L. McKay, who, as head of the police unit that handles metal theft, has gained a reputation as a relentless scrapping enforcer. Now she was faced with the difficult decision of whether to come down hard on a man barely surviving.

“I can’t say that I don’t have sympathy for these people,” Sergeant McKay said. “But they’re breaking the law. Not only are they breaking the law, but they’re affecting the community around them by doing it.”

Understanding Hardship

Sergeant McKay, 43, embodies this region’s blue-collar ethos. Born in Royal Oak, one of Detroit’s comfortable northern suburbs, she moved to an industrial corridor about 25 minutes south of the city at a young age. Her father worked for a Ford stamping plant, while her mother stayed home to raise her and her brother.

When her father was laid off and remained jobless for a few years in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the family received government food rations, she said. Her mother took a job as a police dispatcher, and that sustained them until her father was rehired at another Ford plant.

During those years, she got to know police officers through her mother’s job, and the experience bolstered Sergeant McKay’s already budding fascination with law enforcement — her grandfather worked for the United States Customs Service, and her great-grandfather was a Detroit police detective. Her parents’ response to hardship also influenced her.

“I understand that times can get tough,” she said. “But no matter how tough the times got, my dad didn’t resort to stealing, and neither did my mother.”

So when she became a Detroit police officer nearly two decades ago, Sergeant McKay tried to balance her understanding of adversity with her belief that there was an honest way to get through anything. After years of working on patrol and narcotics, she found an outlet that allowed her to help the city reverse its decay — the copper theft task force.

The unit, initially a small operation on the precinct level, became a full-fledged task force around 2008, as scrappers blew through the city with gale force. Metal prices had begun soaring a few years earlier with increasing demand from China, India and beyond. Not long after that, America’s housing and financial crises set in, and Detroit was hit especially hard. Jobs vanished. Tens of thousands of homes went into foreclosure and were abandoned. Schools, churches and businesses closed. That left a platter of empty

properties, full of metal sitting seductively in an economically battered city.

Thieves dismantled the plumbing, water tanks and heating systems of empty homes and schools. They left buildings in such disrepair that no one could restore them, and those eyesores helped drive down other property values.

Scrapers also targeted utilities, scaling poles during the light of day to cut down electrical lines in search of precious copper, leaving highly charged wires splayed dangerously on the street and causing sporadic power failures. Streetlights died, and neighborhoods went dark.

At the height of Detroit's scrapping problem in 2007, DTE Energy, a utility company, reported 361 power line thefts; AT & T reported 444. Last year, about 40,000 structures in the city were in such poor shape that they needed to be demolished, and officials blamed scrapping for much of that. Last March, Detroit's police chief, James Craig, said the police academy had lost power after scrapers stole copper wire from a nearby transformer. All told, city officials estimated that scrapers did tens of millions of dollars in damage.

In the meantime, though, the city was working hard to cut into the illegal industry that fueled the life of Mr. Jones and many others.

Detroit Public Schools installed motion sensor alarms in its vacant buildings. Lawmakers stiffened penalties for people stealing and selling scrap metal, reclassifying some misdemeanors as felonies. The copper theft task force worked with prosecutors and the utility companies to find the main thieves. To ensure that the scrapyards were not buying stolen material, the authorities pressed them to take inventory of who was selling to them.

The State Legislature last year passed a measure forbidding scrapyards to pay cash on the spot to anyone offering \$25 or more worth of commonly stolen metals like copper, requiring the yards instead to complete the sales by check, debit card or money order in the mail. It also required the yards to photograph both what they were buying and the sellers.

Those measures, along with lower commodity prices and increasing scarcity of scrap metal in the city, have made scavenging harder and less lucrative. Wire and metal thefts are down precipitously. Three years ago, the

police requested 222 warrants for scrap metal theft; with about 25 requests so far this year, the city is on a much slower pace. In some neighborhoods, including the North End, scrapping is all but a dying criminal art.

That does not mean that Sergeant McKay has become any less vigorous in pursuing scrappers and their patrons.

Ridding the city of illegal scrappers, Sergeant McKay said, starts with squeezing those who reward the thieves. “Where there’s no buyer, there’s no seller,” she said.

So her four-person unit, which also handles graffiti and illegal dumping, spends much time making sure that scrapyards follow the law. On one sunny Friday afternoon in early February, she ventured out to visit a few yards in southwest Detroit, riding with one of her investigators, Detective Laura Splitt, in one of the department’s unmarked sport utility vehicles.

Her mission that afternoon was to gather intelligence on Mr. Jones and five other men accused of stealing from the industrial scrapyard where he was arrested.

Route to Scrapping

Mr. Jones, too, is a symbol of working-class Detroit.

His father was absent from his life, and his mother raised him and his siblings on public assistance. Mr. Jones said he eventually got factory work. But after being fired from a 7Up bottling plant in the 1990s, he could not find a steady job, he said. For a time, he worked at a blind pig — an illegal late-night gambling house — but took to scrapping as his primary source of income.

In the 1990s, he could find abundant scrap on street corners and curbs. People who were cleaning out buildings would call him to help cart away metal. He also went the illegal route, sneaking into abandoned buildings.

Mr. Jones said he targeted only open, already scavenged buildings; his police record includes more than a half-dozen arrests for breaking and entering. And he said he had never resorted to violence to make money. “So that’s the way I soothed my conscience,” he said.

So it was, in his mind, an honest form of work, one of several in which he engaged. He said proudly that he never begged for cash, but would plead for

odd jobs: pumping gas, washing windshields, shoveling driveways. But scrapping was his favorite.

“I got to the point where I enjoyed the work,” Mr. Jones said. “It’s a job and an adventure.”

He could earn hundreds of dollars in a single day, he said, allowing him to rent a room in a house. He bought a television and a radio, purchased new clothes and food for himself and his girlfriend. But the money Mr. Jones earned also fed his addiction to crack cocaine.

“I could have done a lot of things with a whole lot of that money that I just let go up in smoke,” he said.

He saw his life spiraling. He lost contact with his children — a memory that still brings tears to his eyes. And he became involved with a new partner who had a young son. So Mr. Jones dropped the crack habit.

These days, with scrapping both riskier and less lucrative, he increasingly sticks to Dumpster diving, a less prosperous venture. Weeks before his arrest, Mr. Jones was spelunking in a trash bin on a January evening when he found a copper and brass radiator that he would have trouble selling. He does not have a car, and the next day, he could not find anyone to give him a ride to the junkyard. It was nearly noon, and he had not eaten yet.

“What you going to do now, Pinky?” Mr. Jones whispered, referring to himself as a mouse from the cartoon “Pinky and the Brain.”

He eventually found help in the form of an “after-hours man,” a secondhand dealer who pays below-market prices to scrappers in desperate situations, then takes the metal to the yard to sell at full cost.

Mr. Jones rolled a baby stroller holding the radiator to an alley near the dealer’s house. A few minutes later, he walked away with \$10 in hand and a promise of an additional \$10 later — about half of what Mr. Jones said he would have received if he had made it to the scrapyard.

Later that night, he snuggled in bed with some day-old chili fries donated by a Coney Island restaurant in the neighborhood, hoping his body would keep the fries warm enough to be edible in the morning.

Mr. Jones stays in the living room of an abandoned two-story frame home where the stench of landfill suffuses the air, wood planks jut out of the

walls and the windows are boarded up or covered with trash bags. He sleeps under a heap of blankets, on a soiled mattress he found.

When he woke the next morning, he still had a dollar in his pocket, but not enough for food and cigarettes. After the owner of a pay-by-the-hour hotel gave him \$5 for hacking dog feces out of the icy yard, Mr. Jones set off westward into a stiff headwind, to hit up his regular garbage containers.

At a bend in a quiet street, he lifted himself into a trash bin large enough to fit several hot tubs. He threw out things that might be of value: empty plastic two-liter bottles of Cherry Coke and Faygo Pop, earbuds, an HDMI cable, computer circuits. Within about five minutes, he was off to the next bin, where he pulled out a bunch of empty soda cans. The pep in his stride seemed to increase as he turned down an alley.

“Can’t make it to the dollar till you get past that first penny,” Mr. Jones said moments before finding three pennies in the cracked pavement of a parking lot.

Finally he arrived at what promised to be the most lucrative location of the day — a pair of large industrial trash bins next to the loading dock of a high-rise commercial building.

His arms clutching the edge and feet dangling into one of the bins, he lowered himself with the gentle agony of someone dipping into an ice bath. He began scooping out treasures: stage lights, power cords, a steel box.

After rounding up the scrap in a black trash bag, Mr. Jones stashed some pieces of steel behind the trash bin. They were too heavy to carry, so he planned to find someone with a truck who could haul them later. He balanced the heavy load on his head and, hunching over, lumbered toward his home.

Breathing heavily, he stopped and pulled out the bottle of water he had found earlier. “Lifesaver!” he said before taking a swig.

Along the way, he crossed in front of one of the North End’s newest urban farms, started in this mostly black neighborhood by white college students in their 20s. “A lot of white folks is moving back in the North End,” Mr. Jones said. “We all still got to get along together.”

He says he wants to see new money and new energy come into the city, into this neighborhood. He would welcome a full-time job if he could find one,

he said. Detroit's unemployment rate was about 12 percent at the beginning of this year. But he does not believe progress will trickle down to people like him. "I ain't going to benefit from it," he said. Later, turning his eyes toward the cloudy sky, he added, "I don't see no \$100 bills falling."

Seeking Evidence

Before Mr. Jones can think about money, he has to worry about the law nipping at his heels.

Sergeant McKay had pictures of six people accused of stealing from the industrial yard — evidence obtained from the yard's security patrol and police files. She knew the identities of four of them, including Mr. Jones. Now she was off to find evidence that could help elevate the charges against the men.

Her plan was to see if scrapyards had records of buying from the men. If they did, she would investigate what they had sold to the yards. If she could determine that they were selling metal stolen from the industrial yard, or elsewhere, that could help support felony charges.

"It's not even so much about people going to jail as it is with the state of the city right now, sending the message to these people that this isn't going to go unnoticed anymore," she said.

She also wanted to keep pressure on the yards.

"I compare it to supervising children," Sergeant McKay said. "The minute that you turn your head, you know they're going to get into mischief."

Sergeant McKay had barely set foot in the muddy yard of Detroit Iron & Metal when she noticed something suspicious. Two men hacking something with a chain saw immediately stopped when they spotted her. Sergeant McKay did not recognize them, but they appeared to know her.

"They probably have her picture on a dart board," Detective Splitt joked.

Sergeant McKay asked what they were doing, and one of the men nervously told her that they were cutting a transformer. She had never seen that done before, she told them.

After the yard's computer failed to get a hit on any of the suspects, she asked the scale operator, Zarko Bilobrk, about the transformer. He explained that a contractor had brought it in, and they needed to break it down to process it.

Sergeant McKay noted that the transformer was leaking a noxious-smelling fluid and said she might call the Environmental Protection Agency.

“You know all that oil that is dumping out of those is really bad,” she told Mr. Bilobrk, who promised to address the situation.

Later, Sergeant McKay headed to the yard where she expected to hit pay dirt, Southwest Metals, which was linked to nearly half of her cases last year, she said.

As Sergeant McKay and Detective Splitter entered the office, the manager sprang from his chair. He escorted them to a lanky man behind a computer, who punched in the names of the six scrappers, and, bingo, three names popped up, including Mr. Jones’s. But the computer operator said that Mr. Jones had not been there since October — and the yard did not have a copy of Mr. Jones’s identification available to make sure that this was the correct Robert Jones.

The manager told the sergeant and detective that one of the men they were investigating used to come in daily, sometimes twice a day, with as much as 800 pounds of prepared steel, including I-beams that support buildings. This raised a red flag for Sergeant McKay. That type of steel usually comes from large buildings, and unless the sellers have documentation to prove that they were hired to remove it, chances are that they stole it.

Sergeant McKay suspected that the seller was a secondhand dealer who had hired what she called “minions” to scavenge properties throughout the city and bring him metal.

It was progress. Cracking this case would not solve the city’s scrapping problem, Sergeant McKay acknowledged. But it might mean taking a major illegal dealer off the street and tightening the noose on a problem scrapyard. For her, those would be vital steps in the salvation she preaches for Detroit.

What it might mean for Robert Jones was far less clear. After his arrest at the yard, the police held him for about a day before releasing him because they did not have everything they needed to charge him.

But Sergeant McKay thought Mr. Jones’s case was worth a closer look.

She was unable to come up with data from the scrapyards to confirm that Mr. Jones regularly sold to them. Southwest Metals stalled so much in

responding to multiple requests for information, she said, that she filed numerous citations against the business.

But, Sergeant McKay said, while looking over the investigative notes from Mr. Jones's arrest, she saw that he had indicated that he planned to sell the scrap metal he was accused of taking from the industrial yard. For her, that was enough to justify felony charges, and she referred the case to the county prosecutor's office, which has issued a warrant for Mr. Jones's arrest.

Mr. Jones might earn very little from scrapping, Sergeant McKay said, but she sees him as part of a cycle that destroys properties and, in turn, the city.

"If we can't get a handle on the Robert Joneses of the city, we're not going to be able to get a handle on the problem at hand," she said.

Yet Mr. Jones insisted that although he had entered the industrial yard looking for scrap metal, he had taken nothing. And before that moment of weakness and need, he said, he had sworn off illegal ways. He long ago stopped breaking into buildings to steal scrap, he said.

Mr. Jones still grabs loose pieces of metal, but he said he had become more determined to keep his scavenging aboveboard since the arrest at the industrial yard.

"It was a rude awakening," he said.

Occasionally these days, he stumbles upon a bit of luck. Recently someone dumped stainless steel cages on a corner field in the North End, allowing Mr. Jones to help himself to the pile.

"That's what I do," he said. "One heartbeat at a time. Until Jesus calls me."

Ruin and Renewal: Articles in this series are tracking efforts to revive Detroit's North End neighborhood.

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